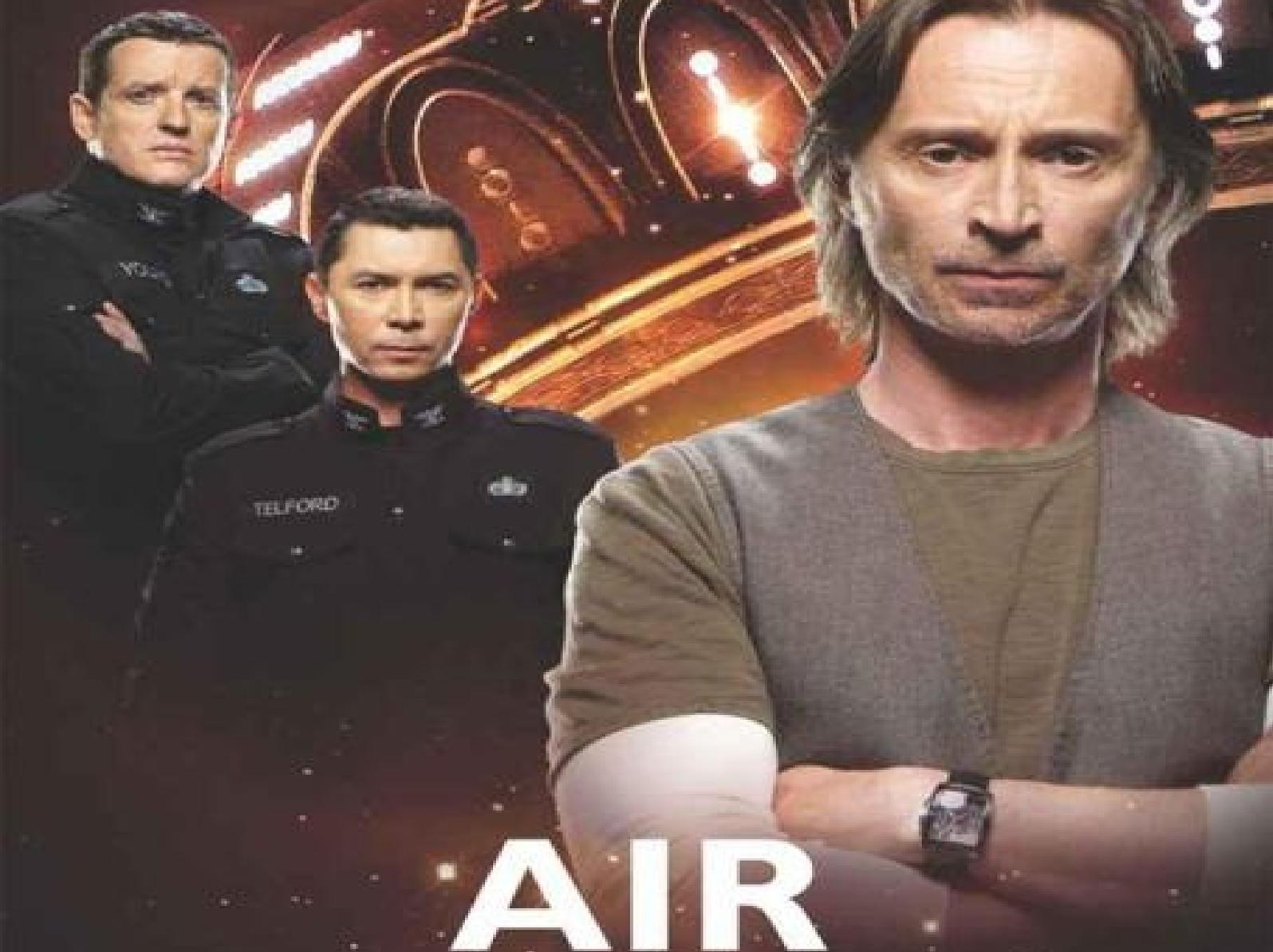


These are the wrong people in the wrong place

SGU

STARGATE UNIVERSE™



AIR

James Swallow

Based on the hit television series created by
Brad Wright and Robert C. Cooper



Air

James Swallow

Based on the scripts by Brad Wright and Robert C. Cooper

FANDEMONIUM BOOKS

An original publication of Fandemonium Ltd, produced under license from MGM Consumer Products.



Fandemonium Books, PO Box 795A, Surbiton, Surrey KT5 8YB, United Kingdom
Visit our website: www.stargatenovels.com



METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER Presents
STARGATE UNIVERSE™

ROBERT CARLYLE LOUIS FERREIRA BRIAN J. SMITH ELYSE LEVESQUE
DAVID BLUE ALAINA HUFFMAN JAMIL WALKER SMITH
Executive Producers JONATHAN GLASSNER and BRAD WRIGHT
MICHAEL GREENBURG RICHARD DEAN ANDERSON
Developed for Television by BRAD WRIGHT & ROBERT C. COOPER
Created by BRAD WRIGHT & ROBERT C. COOPER

STARGATE UNIVERSE © 2011 MGM Global Holdings Inc. STARGATE: UNIVERSE is a trademark of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc. All rights reserved.

Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc TM & © 2011 Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc. All Rights Reserved.

Photography and cover art: Copyright © 2011 Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc. All Rights Reserved.

WWW.STARGATE.MGM.COM



No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in

any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written consent of the publisher. Any person who does any unauthorised act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

Acknowledgements:

The author would like to thank John Scalzi, Brad Wright, Lawren Bancroft-Wilson, Joe Mallozzi, Karol Mora and Jon Rosenberg for their assistance in getting some air under the wings of this adaptation.

Author's Note:

This novel is based on the Stargate Universe episodes "Air, Part 1", "Air, Part 2" and "Air, Part 3". Certain scenes and story elements have been adapted for the purposes of novelization.

CONTENTS

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

PROLOGUE

In the deeps, in the places where the light of suns burns faint and the reach of gravity fails, nothing lives.

The void is inimical to life. Out in the darkness and the unremitting, absolute cold, the sheer absence of anything but scatterings of free hydrogen, cosmic rays and stellar dust means that nothing can survive.

The frail, weak meat of organic life perishes in moments. Blood and fluids flash-boiling and freezing all at once. Organs detonating under pressure violation. Skin disintegrating, precious breaths torn away. The dark punishes anything with the temerity to invade its realm; and in the infinite emptiness of it all, those who die are lost and forgotten.

But still they come, in search of something. Knowledge and power. Purpose and redemption. Life challenges the darkness to find its destiny.

Against the reach of the endless night and the ocean of stars, the ship thundered on, its voyage unending.

It was vast, by the human scale of things. If an observer could have stood upon the dorsal hull of the vessel, they would have seen canyons of old steel and domes of azure glass, great battlements of black iron and crenellations raised high; and beyond, dwarfing all else, a steep-sided ziggurat straddling the craft's mid-line. From close in, the dimensions of the construct could only be guessed at.

If one could stand at steps removed, far enough out beyond the glowing wake of energy that sheathed the vessel in transit, then the full shape of it would be revealed. From a sword-tip bow growing out to an enormous axe-blade stern, the ship cut through the dark. It might have been a weapon, thrown far by a defiant enemy, or a graceful carving cast adrift by artisans and thinkers. It moved quicker than the pulse of starlight itself, warping the nature of space about its long, ornate flanks. The ship's course was straight and steady, set down by minds long dead and maintained by thinking machines that had shepherded the vessel across countless light-years.

The kiss of the void belied the age of it. In places, the hull metal was as shipyard-bright as it had been the day it had been forged; but elsewhere the passage of eons was visible in pitted, corroded towers and broken spires. And there were other scars upon her, scars that might have been marks left by the fury of a singularity, the blaze of a mad sun, the hammer blow of a comet. Or perhaps not; perhaps they were the wounds of tooth and claw from enemies who had died trying to take the ship for themselves. The disfigurements of old battles, lost to time and long forgotten.

Within, the ship was not quite silent. Through each deck, mighty engines as

large as mountains made their power known with a steady, bass rumble that reached everywhere, resonating up through old iron floor plates and arching walls of dense gunmetal. The vessel had a pulse of machine-life to it, as slow and careful systemry continued on an endless cycle of duties, following programs that had been laid down in an era before humans had walked upright.

But it was faint indeed. Pale trceries of oxygen ice layered the lengths of the ship's endless, frigid corridors. The cold and dormant spaces within the hull were dark and bleak. As it had been for so long — *Decades? Centuries? Millennia?* — there were no footsteps, no voices, no simple human sounds. If there were ghosts, then they did not make themselves known.

And then, without warning, in the heart of the craft the stillness was shattered forever.

There were many spaces inside the ship that resembled the chamber, long halls of arching iron ribs that rose up from a worn deck to meet a darkened, forge-built ceiling. Turns of copper-sheathed rails guided flights of stairs up from the lowest level to a higher ring of balconies that looked down upon the still, cold room. Here and there, sculpted consoles emerged from the deck plates, faces turned upward, each one catching a glitter of faint light across glassy, inert panels.

The chamber was unremarkable but for the one thing that set it apart, the great object that could not fail to draw all attention. At one end of the hall, rising from a slot in the deck, a heavy ring of metal, gray as sea-ice, dense as cast pewter, stood sentinel. Its circumference was separated into nine sections, each bordered by a sculpted arrowhead of steel, bone and tarnished gold; and in turn each section was divided into four leaves of metal, each etched with a string of symbols resembling lines, circles and dots.

Reaching out across some vast and incalculable distance, exotic energies that were the precursors of a rip in the fabric of space-time brushed the intelligence of the device, and the ship that surrounded it. With a groan of collapsing energies, the tempo of the vessel's vast drives slowed, and it fell back from the near-light speed velocities of its normal cruise to a more sedate pace.

Steady, patient devices buried in the walls came to life with resonant gusts of atmosphere, flooding the chamber with breathing gasses, while concealed elements in the floors and the walls poured new heat into the room, warring against the void-chill soaked deep through the starship's hull. Long-silent warning sirens came to life.

The great steel circle trembled, awakening. With a rush of sudden motion, the entirety of the ring began to rotate about its axis, spinning, orienting itself for the instant when it would accept a rush of power that had come to it from far across the cosmic void.

At once, the spin halted and every chevron about the circle flashed a brilliant, star-bright white. From the inner space of the ring, dead air was transformed into a glittering, shining wave front. It thundered outward across the chamber, punching a channel through the substance of the universe itself. The storm-roar echoed down the empty corridors of the vessel, before dying away into a ripple of light and color.

The Stargate was open; and in the next second a human being came hurtling

through it, too high, too fast, too hard.

Matthew Scott wasn't exactly a stranger to pain. He'd taken enough of it in his time. Fights in bars, rough play during high school sports, and that incident during jump training... But those had just been physical impacts, just the brute force collision between meat and obstacle. This was something outside his experience.

The lieutenant had heard the theory. Once in a while, the mention slipped into the conversations of the old dogs who'd served on the early SG teams, the guys who were now instructors or base commanders. He'd heard them talk about something they called 'the Hard Gate'. It had happened a fair few times in the early days of the Stargate program, or so the stories went. Something about the way the gate on Earth wasn't initially *exactly* synched up with the gate it was dialing out to. If it was just a little out of whack, you came out the other end covered in frost. But if the mismatch was above a certain tolerance, then it off-set your kinetic energy. You took a careful, easy step through the entry gate, but when you reached the exit end of the wormhole, well, the cumulative error in synch had accelerated you up some. The bigger the distance, the worse it would be. Of course, the dialing computers were quickly upgraded to deal with this problem and the incidence of a 'Hard Gate' dropped to almost nothing, and even on those rare occasions when it did occur, it usually only affected the first guy through the puddle, as the gates quickly cross-talked and stabilized the connection. But pity that guy walking point, though.

All this flashed through Matthew Scott's mind in the half-second or so between leaving Icarus Base behind and being shredded into a disincorporated matter stream, then reintegrated to find himself flying through the air like he'd been shot from a cannon. The bright light and noise of the Icarus gate room, then the rush of the wormhole, were replaced by icy blackness — and for an instant Scott was gripped by the fear that he'd emerged through a planet-orbiting space gate, like they had out in the Pegasus galaxy; but then a steel floor came up out of the gloom and slammed into him, blasting the air from his lungs in an explosive wheeze.

He rolled over on to his back, blinking away the pain. The watery shimmer of wormhole-light cast a cold, polar glow over everything, surrounding him with jumping, fluid shadows.

A woman's scream, thin and reedy, snapped him back to the moment. Scott turned, ignoring the jags of pain all down his side, and looked toward the open Stargate. People were coming through after him, boiling across the threshold in rough disorder, one after another. Another man, then a woman, both of them carrying heavy packs, both of them yelling out as they collided with the floor, crashing into each other hard enough to bruise or maybe break bone. They barely got clear before more surged through behind them, and with each new arrival the chill air filled up with cries of panic and surprise. It was like watching a flood, and in amid the mayhem, baggage and vital equipment were getting knocked around or cast away.

Scott didn't see any uniforms among them and he grimaced reflexively. *Civilians. Take them out of their comfort zone and they fall to pieces.* He turned the pain from his bruises into annoyance, and that propelled him to his feet. Someone was going to have to play traffic cop here, and he was the only person in the room with bars on his collar.

“Get outta the way!” Securing his weapon, he darted forward, waving his hands and shoving stumbling figures away from the line of exit through the Stargate. “I said get outta the way, damn it! Make a hole!”

He gave a pale-faced guy in a lab coat a forceful push and almost stumbled right into the woman standing behind him. He saw dark hair framing Asian features, and eyes that were so lost and terrified he suddenly felt bad about dismissing the fears of the civvies so quickly. He remembered her name; Camile Wray, one of the suit-and-tie brigade posted to Icarus by the International Oversight Advisory.

“Where are we?” she said, her voice high and tight with tension. “This isn’t the SGC! Why didn’t we come back to Earth?”

Scott wasn’t about to stop and discuss the matter of their swift exit. “There was no time to explain!” he snapped, and propelled her out toward the shadowed edges of the room. “Go!”

With swift motions and barked orders, the lieutenant started to make a dent in the chaos of the evacuees, dragging dazed newcomers out of the path of those following on behind, directing them to gather up fallen packs or just move away with whatever they’d been given to haul through. It was a hysterical moving day crossed with a haunted house ride, only much less fun than it sounded.

Other people saw what he was doing and joined in. Lab coat guy came back and began to copy Scott’s actions, pulling new arrivals aside, guiding them off into the dimness. It wasn’t enough, though. Too many people were spilling through, and they were coming faster than the folks on this side could deal with them.

The lieutenant took a breath and keyed the handheld radio clipped to the breast of his combat vest. “This is Scott,” he said, “I need you to slow down the evac! Everyone’s coming in too hot, we can’t handle them!” When a reply didn’t come back in the next instant, he tried again, calling for his commanding officer. “Colonel, come in! Do you copy me, over?”

Still nothing. He advanced toward the gate’s event horizon, threading through people picking themselves up off the deck, or bumbling around like lost children. Without thinking he reached down and helped a civilian get to his feet.

The man stood up and Scott recognized another familiar face. “Doctor Rush?”

Nicholas Rush blinked and gave him a weak nod by way of a thank you. The man had a face that hinted at a hard life, eyes that could go right through you. Scott wondered if that was for show, or if that was who Rush really was.

“Lieutenant,” he said, and Scott saw right away that the man wasn’t the least bit afraid. If anything, the scientist looked...*interested*. Scott moved on, leaving Rush behind. Sure, the guy was some kind of super-genius, but there was something about the man’s attitude that didn’t sit right with the young Air Force officer. He shook the thought away; this wasn’t the time to dwell on that. He had a job to do.

Scott tried the radio again, catching sight of Curtis, one of the base’s USMC contingent. The Marine had an unconscious woman cradled in his arms, and there was blood marking her face from an ugly cut over her forehead.

Curtis shouted loud to be heard over the noise. “I need a medic here!”

“Sergeant!” Scott called out to get the man’s attention, and pointed away with the radio. “Get any casualties off the line. Move ’em first, patch ’em later.”

The Marine scowled back at him but accepted the order with a nod and moved

off.

Scott tried the radio a third time. "Icarus Base, respond!"
All that came back through the open gate were more bodies.

Eli Wallace was *most definitely* a stranger to pain. One could even suggest that he had done his best to live a life where his exposure to any pain-causing vectors was as minimal as humanly possible. Eli considered the eating of brutally spicy food, the occasional paintball tournament and an annual game of street hockey the only places where pain was allowed into his life. He didn't view this as a failing on his part in any way; rather, Eli imagined that it made him smarter than most people, who willingly busted themselves up for what he considered to be no good reason.

So coming through the Stargate at the head of a crowd of terrified people and being slammed into a steel floor was not something he was prepared for. Eli scrambled back to his feet, fighting down the raw, animal urge to panic, and ran his hands over his chest and legs, desperately afraid that he was going to find something in the wrong place.

He'd actually been looking forward to going through the Stargate for the first time, but being forced to do it under such dangerous and near-frantic conditions had worked up a whole array of fears in his mind. He'd closed his eyes as he went through, but all he could think of was the fate of poor Jeff Goldblum in *The Fly*. Eli patted his face, and felt a rush of relief when he realized it wasn't coming off in his hands.

He barely had time to register that before a big, heavy equipment case burped through the wormhole's event horizon and whizzed past his head, narrowly missing him. The case hit the deck in front of him and cracked open along a seam, disgorging its contents in a wide fan.

Nearby, a figure in a black combat uniform was leading one of the other scientists out of harm's way. Eli saw the woman's face and his eyes flicked to her name badge — Johansen. *She was a medic, wasn't she?*

"I think my arm's broken," said the man.

"Take it easy, Volker," she told him, moving him aside so she could concentrate on people with more immediate needs.

Eli turned back to the gate in time to see the next thing coming through; a middle-aged man, in a suit that was probably worth more than every item of clothing Eli owned put together. The first word out of the man's mouth was "Chloe?"

"Senator Armstrong?" Eli hesitated, not sure what he should do to help the politician. He glanced around. Armstrong's daughter had been in front of Eli in the scramble to go through the gate; she had to be close by.

The senator didn't seem to notice Eli and pushed past him. "Chloe? Where are you?"

"Dad!" A voice called out from across the room and both of them turned to see a young woman in what had to be the most inappropriate outfit for their present circumstances. "I'm over here!" Chloe Armstrong somehow managed to remain looking dynamite in her designer dress, even though it was peppered with rock dust.

Armstrong started forward toward his daughter, and Eli trailed after him, but Johansen blocked the politician's path. "Senator, give me a hand, please." She gestured at an injured man lying at her feet. He was one of the number crunchers from the base

labs, and looking very much the worse for wear.

Armstrong was still focused on Chloe. “But my daughter is—”

“She’s fine, I saw her,” said the officer, her voice all hard edges and command school brusque. “But this man isn’t, so give me a hand!”

Belatedly, Eli realized that he ought to be helping as well, and moved in to give some support to the pair of them. The woman gave him a nod and he placed her face. Her first name was Tamara; he’d heard some of the other Air Force guys calling her ‘T.J.’ She looked like the type of person who could flick from severe to smooth in a heartbeat.

“Over here,” she said, and Eli and Armstrong dutifully followed her to a clear spot to put the guy down. Tamara bent over the scientist, and so she didn’t see Armstrong grimace in pain, his face going pale. The senator’s hand went to his side, and Eli opened his mouth to speak; but the man was already walking away, his job done.

“Are you okay?” Chloe asked, coming to her father.

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” said Armstrong, covering his moment of pain as they walked off. “Where the hell are we?”

Eli stood and watched Tamara work, suddenly at a loss for what to do with his hands.

Nicholas Rush took the curved stairs two at a time, almost bounding on to the upper level of the chamber — *the gate room*, he corrected. His hands dropped to the rail around the edge of the upper balcony and he flinched. For a second he could have sworn he felt an electric tingle run through him, a giddy thrill at the sheer amazement of standing here, in this place, seeing this sight. His gaze flicked down to the rail. The metal was old and pitted, but worn smooth from the action of hands upon it. Rush wondered how long it had been since a human being had stood where he stood now, touched the metal that he was touching. *Millions of years ago?* It was staggering to consider. The construction of the chamber was like no Ancient technology he had seen. The metallic structure was repeated everywhere, on the walls and the rails. Below he’d found a console of similar design, but it hadn’t responded to any of his attempts to activate it.

He looked up and stared out across the room, across the chaos below. Some fifty, perhaps sixty people had now arrived through the open Stargate, disordered and afraid, some literally forming a pile of bodies and equipment in front of the shimmering wormhole. Rush blinked and realized that this was the first time he had looked back to actually see the Stargate he had come through. The white glow of the active chevrons burned hard in the dimness, illuminating a construct clearly different from the gate designs found in the Milky Way and Pegasus galaxies.

Perhaps that’s the original pattern, he wondered, the classic model? He filed away the thought for later consideration.

People were still trickling through, fleeing in panic from the calamity unfolding back at Icarus, all that distance away at the far end of the wormhole. Rush knew that on some level he was supposed to be afraid, but he didn’t feel it. He looked down at the people, at the soldiers and civilians, his so-called colleagues and the rest of the make-weights, and he found himself looking right through them.

He took it all in, the Stargate, the walls of gray steel and the air of old and ancient days; and it was all he could do not to break into a smile. The only emotion he could bring to light was pride.

Scott had given up on the radio and gone back to doing what he could at his end — namely, motivating the Icarus refugees with sharp words and in some cases, your actual kick in the ass. By this point, a good percentage of the people coming through were airmen and jarheads, and they were trained well enough that when a motivated-looking young first lieutenant barked an order in their direction, they did what they were told, double-time.

The civilians, though... They were utterly unready for this. Icarus was supposed to be a cushy, low-traction posting where scientists did things with boxes of blinky lights and generally had nothing more to worry about than running low on pudding in the mess hall. They just weren't trained for everything to go from fine to FUBAR at the drop of a hat.

So, like they told him at OCS, *if in doubt, shout*. Scott drew in a breath and snarled at every civilian in earshot. "Clear this area! There could still be more incoming!"

Airmen and Marines would have moved. The civilians mostly just hesitated. They were still working off the shock of it all, and the gate journey was just one more thing on top of everything else that had happened.

It was Ron Greer's voice that cut through the stunned silence. "You heard him, people!" he roared, drill-sergeant loud. "Move move *move!*"

That lit a fire under them, and finally the people in front of the gate began to shift away, but not quick enough.

Greer threw him a look and Scott nodded to the stocky, dark-skinned Marine. "Where's Colonel Young?" he asked.

"He was right behind me," said Greer, nodding back toward the open wormhole.

Scott turned to the gate in time to see the last man come through; and he pitied the poor son-of-a-bitch, because the black-clad figure was buoyed on a brilliant blast of fire and smoke that crashed out of the gate behind him. The force of the discharge blew hot, charred air into the gate room, bringing with it the stink of burnt plastic, ozone and other smells that Scott didn't want to think too much about.

He barely had time to process all that when the Stargate gave a rattling hum and went dark. The wormhole vanished into quantum foam and all illumination in the chamber was extinguished. The screaming started a second or two after that.

Someone shouted "Lights!" and a bright beam stabbed out of the darkness, sweeping across the room. Scott saw smoke-dirty faces caught in the sodium glare, staring out into the dark, desperate and afraid.

More flashlights blinked on, and Scott snatched a MagLite from the grip of a nearby airman and went searching. A cold, unpleasant certainty was settling in on him, and as much as he didn't want to confirm it, he knew he had to.

His beam fell on the crumpled form of the last man through, and Scott's jaw set. "Colonel?"

Colonel Everett Young grimaced with pain and tried to lever himself off the

deck without success. Scott moved closer, and tried very hard not to think about the fact that Young was the first survivor he had seen that outranked him.

The colonel blinked owlishly and focused on the other officer. Scott's CO looked ten years older than his normal hard-edged forties, the pain taking all the life out of him. "Where are we?" he coughed.

Scott bent down to support the colonel's head, holding him up so they could converse face to face. "I don't know, sir." *Kinda hoped you'd have that answer.* "Are you...?"

Young tried to move but the effort drained him. "Lieutenant," he began, and Scott knew what he would say next before the words left his lips. "You're in charge."

He was going to argue, but the colonel put an end to that by losing consciousness. Scott cursed under his breath and settled the man back on the deck; and that was when he realized his hand was wet. He shone the flashlight on his palm and it was crimson with Young's blood.

In an instant he was standing and calling out. "T.J.! Get over here!" He turned and spotted her bent over an injured scientist.

Tamara ignored the order for a moment. She took the hand of another civvie — a woman, one of the other eggheads from Icarus — and placed it carefully over a wound she'd just bandaged. "Keep pressure here until the bleeding stops." Then she was striding over to him, her expression unreadable.

Scott stood back and let her take a look at Young. "Is he okay?"

The medic bent down. "I don't know."

"We *need* him," he hissed, in a low, intense voice.

Tamara didn't look up. "Yeah. I got that. Just back off, Matt. Give me some room to work."

"Right." He did so, and found his hands tensing into fists. How all of this had landed on his shoulders was beyond him. It wasn't what he'd expected. Not at *all*.

Scott's flashlight caught a thickset figure in a hoodie at the edge of its illumination and he went after him. "Wallace!"

The genius turned to him. He looked as dazed as everyone else. "Uh..."

"What is this place?" demanded Scott. "Do you know what planet it is, or if it's a ship, or whatever?"

Eli held up a hand, apparently afraid that he was about to get blamed for something. "Look, I just did what Rush told me to—"

Scott seized on the mention of the other man's name. "Where is he?"

"I don't know, he went through the gate ahead of me."

The lieutenant nodded. "Yeah, he made it, I saw him." He moved into the middle of the chamber, calling out "Rush! Rush, where are you?"

Greer approached, jerking a thumb over his shoulder. "Went that way, I think. Up the stairs over there."

Scott accepted this with a nod. If anyone was going to have answers, it would be the Brit doctor. He took a step and a sullen rumble echoed through the decks. He had the sudden sense of the whole ship tensing around them, like an animal coiling its muscles before pouncing; then a second tremor resonated through, and Scott felt a brief sensation of motion and velocity that faded a heartbeat later.

"What the hell was that?" said Greer.

“I don’t know.” Scott hesitated, then snapped out an order to the Marine. “Sergeant, get these people settled down. Start making an inventory of everything we brought through as soon as you can. Try to figure out who and what we have. No one leaves this room.” He shot a look at Wallace and, as an afterthought, thrust the MagLite into his hand. “Eli! You help him!”

The guy took the flashlight and panned it around, and his face changed as he got the first good look at the place they were in. Eli’s mouth dropped open.

It was then, just by chance, that Scott noticed for the first time the writing on the t-shirt Eli was wearing beneath his hoodie. It was white text on a red background, some kind of nerd joke, just three words: YOU ARE HERE.

Yeah, he thought as he walked away, wherever the hell that is.

72 hours earlier

CHAPTER ONE

The skies above the planet Omegus IV were a curtain of atomic flame.

SkullCruisers from the nine fleets of the Star Mongols lay in orbit, their neutronic blasters raining blazing particle death down upon the last bastion world of the Phoenix Brigade. Time ebbed away; soon the photon shell protecting the planet would break open like a Y'kin'la egg, and the peaceful Omegusi would perish...and all because they had been unlucky enough to evolve on a world that had once been a home to the time-lost Precursors.

The warriors of Phoenix Brigade, the galaxy's most steadfast defenders, had tracked the hyper-advanced Precursor technology from star to star, in hopes of uncovering the most powerful of the super-science relics the lost civilization had created — the device the Earthmen had nicknamed 'Prometheus'; but the Star Mongols, the pirates of a million looted planets, were not willing to let the device fall into the hands of the lawful and the noble.

If they could not have Prometheus, then they would obliterate it.

Queen Xaria of the Omegusi bent her knee before the elite Phoenix Brigade warrior and bowed low, her golden hair cascading down over her blue-skinned shoulders and the low-cut gown that revealed the swell of her breasts.

"Lord Captain," she began breathlessly, indicating the stone temple before them. "Our laws forbid us from entering the Temple of Dakara, but it is said that the force you Earthers call Prometheus lurks within. I grant you passage into the holy spaces, so that you might deliver us from the space brigands who come to pillage our world." The Queen waved her scepter and the mystic force wall crumbled. "Enter, hero, if you dare."

The warrior began to move, but the Omegusi ruler had one more thing to say. "Warrior. If you do this, I will give you my hand in matrimony. All that I have will be yours. I ask only that you give me your true name before you embark on this final test."

The Phoenix Brigade warrior paused before answering. "Oh, yeah, right. My name is, uh, ELIsDaMan."

"That is a sucky handle, though," said the tinny male voice in the headset. "It doesn't have...whaddayacall, dignity."

Eli paused, lifting his hands from the keyboard of his computer to reach for the open can of Mountain Dew at his side. He snorted into the microphone at his mouth. "Oh, right. And I suppose Babes_DigMeee is a noble and heroic name?"

"It's an accurate one," came the reply, winging its way across the continental

US from Kansas, where Eli's gamer buddy Josh was busy fighting hordes of Vacuum Dragons instead of working his night shift at the local branch of Buy More.

"In your dreams."

"Yes," agreed Josh, "*Frequently, in fact.*"

Eli sipped his Dew and rolled his eyes, before hunting out a slice of cooling pizza from the box at his feet. As he went for it, his gaze passed over the clock atop his bookshelf and he very carefully ignored the fact that it was past two in the morning. Instead he drummed his fingers in time to the opening riff of Van Halen's 'Atomic Punk' as it issued from a well-worn iPod.

"*How can you listen to that dinosaur rock, man?*"

Eli made a face. "You have no appreciation of the classics. No wonder you keep getting ganked."

He heard Josh cough out a denial. "*I'm not the one wasting my time. That puzzle, with the Queen and all? It's a fake-out.*"

"Beg to differ with you." Eli squared his shoulders and leaned in, hands dancing across the keyboard. On the screen, the noble warrior *ELIsDaMan* stormed forward and vaulted into the Temple of Dakara, toward a wall covered with heavy buttons made of stone. "It's just a question of figuring out the code sequence. Get it right and you win. The core of the planet is the power source. You have to channel it into the weapon to destroy the enemy command ship."

Each of the buttons bore a set of symbols; some of them were blocky shapes that resembled letters, while others were strings of lines and circles. The latter reminded Eli of old Morse Code dot-dash notations.

"*Can't be done, dude.*"

Eli thought otherwise. It all came down to math, and numbers spoke to Eli Wallace in a way that he couldn't really articulate, even if he tried. It was just a thing that he did. He could see the figures strung together, even when they were cloaked under funny-looking symbols like they were right now. Get them in the right order and they fitted like the parts of a well-oiled machine. It was something he'd been able to accomplish ever since he was a kid.

He tapped the keys and used the mouse to start his computer game avatar working at the stone buttons. "I'm doin' it," he reported. In moments, he'd unlock the game's big prize, blast the bad guys and get the alien space babe.

Josh's confidence in him was underwhelming, however. "*It's one'a those programmer's jokes. It can't be solved. They just put it in there to mess with your head. Nobody has ever beaten it.*"

Eli felt a grin cross his lips. He saw the solution in his mind, plain as day. "Already solved it."

"*You did not.*" Josh was adamant.

Pausing to take another sip, Eli cracked his knuckles and put his hand back on the mouse. "Shut up and watch this." He knew Josh was peeking in on his feed from the *Prometheus* game server, and that was fine. He wanted a witness to his stunning victory. Eli tapped the controls and on the screen, his avatar pressed home the final glowing symbols. "Yeah. That's it. Take that!"

What he expected next was some fully-rendered, high-spec CGI cut-scene of *ELIsDaMan* smiting the Space Mongols and winning ultimate power. Instead, the on-

screen view flickered and jerked, then reset, placing his character on a mountaintop that was many, many virtual miles from the Queen and her temple.

“What the hell...?” He blinked, waiting for an error message pop-up, but nothing appeared. He’d simply been bounced right back to the start of the instance that had led him to the temple. Reset, just like that; and with it, months of careful gameplay wasted.

“*What happened?*”

“Nothing.” Eli rested the urge to curse. “Nothing happened. I’m back at the beginning of the level...”

Josh made a negative noise. “*You are so full of yourself. Guess you’re not so smart after all, huh?*” He broke up into sniffy giggles.

Eli ignored him, shaking his head, annoyed at the arbitrary unfairness of the game’s glitch. “It worked,” he insisted. “The firing code locked in.”

“*Whatever. Look, I’m going to gear up with ChezeGod and the other guys for a raid on the Mecha-Centaurs, you wanna come with?*”

“No.” In disgust, Eli pulled off the headset and glared at his virtual self on the screen, as if it were the fault of Elite Lord Captain *ELIsDaMan* that the game had suffered some kind of brain-fart. “That was extremely unsatisfying.”

For a second, he thought about bringing up his router dashboard, maybe checking the settings to make sure there hadn’t been some weird lag between his PC and the *Prometheus* game servers, but then his fatigue caught up with him and Eli realized that his eyes felt like sand and he hadn’t taken a pee in over ninety minutes. All those sodas had to go somewhere.

Thoroughly irritated, Eli vowed that tomorrow morning would be spent posting a stinging rebuke on the *Prometheus* message boards about the glitchy puzzle, and he padded away to the bathroom, composing his retort in his mind, already thinking about sleep.

Because of this, he was out of the room when the lights on his wireless modem began flashing furiously, as his anti-virus and firewall programs were swiftly and effortlessly penetrated.

He awoke from dreams about cute girls with blue skin, to the sound of his name being shouted in that particular tone that only female parents are capable of making. *The Mom-Sound*.

“Eli!” The door banged open and Marion Wallace, late like she always was, waded in through the debris of her son’s slacker lifestyle, fixing a ‘Hi! How Can I Help?’ badge to the top of the blouse they made her wear at Bobbi’s Fine Dine.

Eli’s awareness rose slightly from his sleep-addled state, but not enough to form a cogent reply. He lay face down amid the snarl of sheets, sprawled and unkempt.

“You didn’t even set your alarm...” she continued, then raised the gain on her shout an octave higher. “*Eli!*”

That was enough to shock him fully awake, and he blinked back to something approaching alertness. “What?” he managed.

Marion was now in the process of smoothing down her outfit, simultaneously fixing her son with an acid glare. “I don’t have time for this. I thought you had a job interview today?”

“They cancelled,” offered Eli, his words muffled by a faceful of pillow. “I was up all night.”

Neither explanation was satisfactory. Marion glared at Eli’s inert computer, which occupied one corner of his room with so much hardware and strewn cables, it resembled a freeze-frame of an explosion in an electronics store. “Playing those stupid games?” She rounded on him, her disappointment bubbling over. “*They* cancelled, or *you* cancelled?”

Eli gave her a hang-dog look. “Not my skill set, Mom. Seriously.”

She’d heard that before. “Nothing is.” Marion glanced at her watch and hissed between her teeth. “I’m late. We’ll talk about it later.”

The lack of reply she got made it likely that her son had already slipped back into a doze, and she made her way to the door, pausing on the threshold to sigh. Eli was a smart kid, all the tutors had said so, but nothing could keep him focused for more than a short while. Marion despaired of the fact that Eli might never actually find the one thing that could hold his attention. Frowning, grabbing her keys, she jogged swiftly down the stairs and snatched up her coat on the way out. Marion hoped that Eli would be able to buckle down long enough to actually find whatever ‘it’ was, because she was damn sure opportunity wasn’t going to come knocking at the door.

He folded the report closed and dropped it on the seat next to him, before pausing to flick a tiny piece of lint from the front of his uniform jacket. “You’re sure this is the one, Doctor?”

The man sitting opposite him in the limo made a face. “You saw the report.”

“I saw that some kid busting the high score on *Donkey Kong* is apparently a reason to get me out of bed at oh-dark-thirty hours.”

“It’s a little more complicated than that, General. The decode test requires a unique mindset and no little skill to complete. You read the boy’s academic records. High IQ, low self-esteem, intelligent but an under-achiever. Potential without purpose. Just the kind of resource the program needs that gets lost in the cracks.”

“If you say so. I just thought we had enough brains on board without have to do this whole *Sword in the Stone* thing.”

“As I said,” continued the doctor, his tone cooling, “it’s more complicated than that.”

“It so often is.” The general reached for the door handle. “Wait in the car till I call you,” he said.

“Uh, sir—”

He ignored the other man, picking up his service cap and setting it squarely on his head. “Don’t worry, the uniform makes a strong first impression.” He tapped the file. “I got a read on this kid. Believe me, I know the type pretty well.”

“Geniuses?”

“Geeks.” He stepped out into the overcast day, and even though he didn’t need them, put on his pair of service-issue HGU-4/P sunglasses to add a final touch of Air Force cool.

The house was pretty much the same as every other one on the block: small, suburban, two-bedroom. There were signs of neglect here and there, though. A patchy lawn, peeling paint. The file filled in the gaps. Home payments in the black, but just a